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# Winchester Town Meeting member organization has successful first year

NELL ESCOBAR COAKLEY | STAFF WRITER

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Winchester Town Meeting Members Association Chair Lance Grenzeback speaks to members at its first annual town meeting, held Oct 23 in the Mystic School auditorium. COURTESY PHOTO/TMMA

Everyone knows Town Meeting is the legislative body of the town
Winchester, making important decisions for the future of the com

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But sometimes, the number of documents, legalese and other factors going into those decisions can be overwhelming for even the most seasoned of Town Meeting members.

In 2021, Winchester town government put together a committee to find out how it could be more responsive and communicate better with its residents. That's where the ideas for both the Winchester News and the Winchester Town Meeting Members Association (TMMA) were born.

TMMA Chair Lance Grenzeback said the group looking at a Town Meeting organization checked into how Lexington and Brookline set up theirs. Lexington's was formed in 1936 and Brookline in 2018.

"We wanted to provide more support to precinct chairs," Grenzeback said. "And we had heard there was no mechanism where Town Meeting members could talk amongst themselves. You had to call people up."

Town Meeting members gathered for the first TMMA annual meeting on a tour of the Mystic School Oct. 23. COURTESY PHOTO/TMMA

TMMA Communications Manager Jack LeMenager added the de
local media also played a part in how Town Meeting members got their

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news. Once upon a time, he said, news sources reported on meetings and public hearings, which were important in finding out what the issues were.

“People relied on that for keeping themselves informed,” LeMenager said. “Then with COVID, things just became worse. We realized the need to raise awareness for Town Meeting members.”

Grenzeback added it’s not uncommon to find Town Meeting members who say they haven’t received the warrant or motion book. And with all the legal jargon involved, it can be confusing, he said, so people sometimes just don’t bother to ask questions or follow up on information until they actually get to Town Meeting itself.

“I would say the real purpose is to enable people to make well informed decisions and get more information out among Town Meeting members,” Grenzeback said, of TMMA.

**Getting started**

By September 2023, the TMMA was well on its way and the only requirement to be a part of the organization was to be a Town Meeting member in good standing, as certified by the town clerk’s office. Most people were excited while others, said Grenzeback, were hesitant to be on a list where their email inboxes might be flooded with notices

“Lexington told us that almost all their Town Meeting members participate,” Grenzeback said. “But not everyone is active.”

Set up as a private association, TMMA has a nine-member executive board and an advisory committee, who hold one-year terms to be voted on every fall during an annual meeting.

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The organization is supported by dues payable by a voluntary contribution.

Grenzeback pointed out the TMMA is an independent and impartial organization, not an arm of either the town or Town Meeting. Nor is the group registered with the state as a lobbying or advocacy organization and it is certainly not affiliated or supported by political parties, corporations or special interest groups.

All those things are spelled out in the TMMA's charter.

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The real purpose is to give members a forum to discuss issues, post questions and get answers from local officials in order to be more informed for Town Meeting.

"Members can read and post on the site," Grenzeback said. "But the public can go on there and read what's being discussed. They just can't post. And, Town Meeting members are registered under their real names so no one can hide under an alias. If you make a comment, you own it."

LeMenager said no major contentious issues have arisen where people may be posting and there's a lot of engagement on the site. But unless it's a "spicy" issue, he added, sometimes there's not a lot going on.

**Goals for 2023-24**

As TMMA launched, the group set out a list of important goals for its first year: create a website, create bylaws and policies, create a membership directory and establish a monitored discussion board.

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All those goals have not only been met, but exceeded. During its first annual meeting on Oct. 23, the group received a list of additional items the TMMA had done, including providing all members with email addresses, hosting orientation sessions for new members, publishing previews of warrant articles for both spring and fall 2024 town meetings, emailing notices of public hearings, hosting Saturday morning coffees for precinct chairs and sponsoring its first walking tour on Oct. 20 with Planning Board Chair Keri Layton regarding the new Main Street Mixed-use District zoning article proposal.

“We had about 20 people for the North Main walk,” Grenzeback said. “The reaction was better than I thought. People said they drive through that part of town, but they don’t pay attention to the individual buildings.”

Grenzeback added Lexington usually hires buses and takes its Town Meeting members on tours around that community when issues, such as building a new school, come up. He said he found the Sunday walking tour an effective way to give members a chance to see the area involved and ask questions of Layton.

“It was a good symbiotic experience,” LeMenager said. “Keri got a lot of good questions and it gives her an idea of what people might ask at Town Meeting.”

And that’s not the only success. Both said Saturday morning coffees with precinct chairs have been incredibly helpful, especially after someone suggested a half hour recess during the first session of Town Meeting to allow individual precincts to gather and meet one another in their own classrooms.

“That was something we did for the first time this spring,” LeMenager said. “Everyone loved that so we’re going to do it again.”

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Grenzeback added the TMMA is also getting a list of public meeting places where the 24 members of each precinct can meet, should chairs want to convene before a Town Meeting. He said there's a push in 2024-25 to look at ways to further support the precinct chairs.

**Moving forward**

With a successful first year under its belt, what's next for the TMMA?

LeMenager said November will mark the organization's third Town Meeting and he believes things have only gotten better.

"Going forward, I'd like to see more engagement with all our Town Meeting members," he said. "A lot of members tend to show up with their warrant book still in its folder. I want us to try to get past that. If you're going to volunteer and run for office, you ought to be more engaged rather than just showing up."

Both said the goal is to keep improving how TMMA runs.

"We're going to keep trying to figure out how to improve helping Town Meeting members and their constituents," LeMenager added. "We want people to know they can contact us and we want more members to talk with their constituents."

Grenzeback added the goal is to get everyone on the same page. For example, he said some precinct chairs hold fairly regular meetings with their members as well as people living in their area. Others have admitted they don't know how to do that.

"It's basic nuts and bolts support," Grenzeback said. "It's also building expectations. If you set in motion what the expectations are, peo follow through. It will take some time, yes, but then people will just do it."

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He added another goal is to find more people who would like to join the advisory board or be involved with TMMA.

“A number of people have told us they don’t want to be on the board, but they want to participate,” Grenzeback said. “We want more people. That will allow for us to get broader input for ideas. That’s our goal — to build participation.”

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